

Mutual Grieving, Healing and Resilience in Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend*

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We grieve with human words
but animal bodies and animal gestures
and animal movements.¹

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the narrative of mutual healing, grieving and resilience in Sigrid Nunez's novel The Friend. The aim of the article is to determine whether in the presented narrative shared trauma among different species leads to improved resilience of humans and animals, as well as whether a shared experience of grieving and healing is beneficial for both sets of beings involved. An overview of the healing process in humans and animals which takes place after trauma is provided. Although based on a work of fiction, this paper seeks to be a contribution to the field of trauma studies, highlighting the benefits and therapeutic value of human-animal relations and reflecting approaches in fiction.

KEYWORDS

Sigrid Nunez, *The Friend*, grieving, healing, resilience, trauma

Introduction

The death of a loved one is usually psychologically and physically difficult for the bereaved, who tend to realize they are unprepared for it, since “no one knows what it will be like to walk through the world without this other person.”² Death is also a phenomenon that humankind has not been able to overcome, and it often results in a traumatic experience for those witnessing it.

Processing such the difficulties brought by such distress is often the focus of trauma studies in general as well as trauma fiction and literary trauma studies.³ The term *resilience* has been used to denote the means of processing trauma and surviving despite of it or even growing stronger because of it. Author of *Glocal Narratives of Resilience* Ana María Fraile-Marcos speaks not only of adapting to difficult conditions, but goes a step further and speaks of thriving in them.⁴

Accordingly, another question must be asked, that being the nature of relationship between resilience and the death of a loved one. Does resilience after such a loss mean mere survival, as with individuals “having the greatest difficulty adjusting to life after loss,”⁵ or is it useful to explore some

1 Barbara J. King, *How Animals Grieve* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 152, (ebook).

2 Mary-Frances O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss* (New York: HarperOne, 2022), 6.5, (ebook).

3 Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, “Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies”, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (New York: Routledge, 2020).

4 Ana María Fraile-Marcos, “Introduction. Global Narratives of Resilience and Healing,” in *Glocal Narratives of Resilience*, ed. Ana María Fraile-Marcos (Routledge: New York, 2020), 1.

5 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 16.41.

sort of thriving as understood by Fraile-Marcos?⁶ Grief expert and neuroscientist Mary-Frances O'Connor refers to "people who have created beautiful, meaningful, loving lives after terrible losses,"⁷ with such development represented in psychology by the term "post-traumatic growth." This expression is also utilized by Tedeschi and Jenkins, experts on working through trauma with help of animals, who claim "that trauma for some persons, and under some circumstances, is beneficial."⁸

Indeed "resilience also promises to be an important conceptual and heuristic category for analyzing literary narratives."⁹ Expert on cultural narratology of resilience and trauma Michael Basseler lists the novel *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave (2009) as an example of fiction of resilience, a work which again understands resilience as more than mere endurance. Such strength is manifested in the main character of the novel, "who manages not only to survive, but even to develop hope for herself, as well as for others."¹⁰ Boris Cyrulnik, who created the concept of psychology of resilience, calls such literary characters oxymoronic: "Their depression forced them to look for happiness. This oxymoron really is the price we have to pay for resilience."¹¹

Animals, who have lived in symbiosis with humans for millennia, often serve in real life as well as literature as helpers in overcoming trauma and achieving resilience. The first dogs were domesticated approximately 32,000 ago,¹² and have been companions of humans since then. It is safe to say that "our literature and arts celebrate these [human-animal] relationships."¹³ Sigrid Nunez is also well-known for including animals in her works; while "it would be wrong to suggest that Sigrid Nunez [...] is preoccupied with animals [...], when they do appear in her work, they leave an impression."¹⁴ The question if – and perhaps more appropriately *how* – these relationships have affected both humans and animals is being asked with increasing frequency by psychologists, zoologists, veterinarians, anthropologists, and other specialists.

Arts explore more freedom of expression than the sciences, and have long interpreted the human-animal relationship in various ways. Nunez's *The Friend*¹⁵ shows the beauty of the connection between human and animal in the unique setting of a situation requiring that the two save each other, and in doing so are able to save themselves. In this paper I will examine resilience,

6 Fraile-Marcos, "Introduction."

7 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 16.41.

8 Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins, "Introduction: Human Trauma and Animals: Research Developments, Models, and Practice Methods for Trauma-Informed Animal-Assisted Interventions," in *Transforming Trauma: Resilience and Healing Through Our Connections with Animals*, eds. Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins (New York: Purdue University Press, 2019), 7.

9 Michael Basseler, "Stories of Dangerous Life in the Post-Trauma Age: Toward a Cultural Narratology of Resilience," in *Narrative in Culture*, eds. Astrid Erll and Roy Sommer (De Gruyter: Berlin/Boston, 2019), 16.

10 Basseler, "Stories of Dangerous Life in the Post-Trauma Age," 21.

11 Boris Cyrulnik, *Resilience: How Your Inner Strength Can Set You Free From the Past* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 5.47, (ebook).

12 Bruce D. Perry, "Foreword," in *Transforming Trauma: Resilience and Healing Through Our Connections With Animals*, eds. Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins (New York: Purdue University Press, 2019).

13 Perry, "Foreword," xi.

14 Dwight Garner, "Mourning With the Help of a Great Dane," *New York Times*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/05/books/review-friend-sigrid-nunez.html?module=inline&fbclid=IwAR1FSjra9176H_YvXTD9xbmnRWE7W58qfD9QC1HwaviukQCrWF-_PYXKa0I>.

15 Sigrid Nunez, *The Friend* (London: Virgo Press, 2018).

trauma processing, and grieving as portrayed in the novel to answer two questions: How does shared trauma among different species lead to enhanced resilience of humans and animals in the presented narrative, and how is a shared experience of grieving and healing beneficial for both parties involved? The analysis of this particular novel is structured around O'Connor's four stages of grieving:

- spending time in the past
- being in the present
- mapping the future
- teaching what we have learned.¹⁶

Resilience in Literary Narratives

Processing trauma and the processes leading to resilience is not a new concept in literary narratives. In 2004 Anne Whitehead introduced the term trauma fiction to describe a form which “also signals the recent journey of the concept of trauma from medical and scientific discourse to the field of literary studies.”¹⁷ While Whitehead focuses only on trauma and reactions to traumatic experiences, she does not explore processes that lead to resilience. Traumatic experiences perhaps counterintuitively often do not mean survival at all.

While the two concepts are unavoidably linked, “rather than constituting an opposite to trauma [...], resilience is in many ways tied to experiences of trauma as well as to trauma theory.”¹⁸ Cyrulnik defines resilience as “a neuropsychosocial process that allows a new development to be resumed after a psychological trauma.”¹⁹ Put simply, “resilience defines the spirit of those who, having suffered a blow, have been able to get over it.”²⁰

Overcoming a loss might suggest returning to a previous state, a view which according to Cyrulnik is “too legalistic, or even too mechanical, and the concept of restoration provides a better description of resilience.”²¹ Change is therefore unavoidable – surviving means embracing the ability to change and continue living under difficult circumstances.

The theme of surviving in a changed environment – be it social, political, psychological, environmental, or biological – is often detectable in post-apocalyptic or dystopian fiction. Writing about post-apocalyptic narratives, Marion Gymnich lists several examples after 2000, such as Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013), David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), and Max Brooks's *World War Z* (2006), [...] *The Walking Dead* by

16 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*.

17 Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2004), 4.

18 Basseler, “Stories of Dangerous Life in the Post-Trauma Age,” 17.

19 Boris Cyrulnik, “Narrative Resilience – Neurological and Psychotherapeutic Reflections,” in *Multisystemic Resilience. Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change*, ed. Michael Ungar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 109, (ebook).

20 Cyrulnik, *Resilience*, 5.60.

21 Cyrulnik, *Resilience*, 6.239.

Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, and Charlie Adlard (2003–2022), movies like *I Am Legend* (2007), *World War Z* (2013), and the Australian film *Cargo* (2017).²²

Nevertheless, often such narratives focus on massive changes occurring on a grand scheme. Nunez's novel, on the contrary, takes into consideration changes happening on a smaller scale affecting lives of few characters. Although such transformations lack global impact, they can be no less significant. Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend*²³ addresses change in form of death of a loved one, whose passing affects two other characters in particular – his dog and his friend. Such shifts, although seemingly minuscule in the grand scheme of life, is always significant in lives of the deceased's loved ones.

Nunez's²⁴ unique novel addresses the aftermath of loss in lives of two companions – a dog and a woman. A man who is the animal's owner and the woman's friend commits suicide, leaving the dog in the woman's care. The result is a shared path of grieving, as both attempt to process their respective loss. *The Friend* was positively received by critics, winning Nunez the National Book Award for fiction in 2018.²⁵ Reviews in newspapers and periodicals praised the novel as “breathtaking both in pain and in beauty,”²⁶ “penetrating, moving meditation on loss, comfort, memory,”²⁷ “a sneaky gut punch of a novel”²⁸ and “a darkly humorous and unsentimental tale of friendship, mourning, and solace.”²⁹

Loss as a Traumatic Experience

Humans have a great (dis)advantage over animals, the fact that they are conscious of their future. They are also conscious of the finiteness of things in the sense they realize nothing lasts forever – “among animals, we alone fully anticipate the inevitability of death.”³⁰ Humans are more capable of understanding and preparing for death – whether their own, or the death of a loved one. While animals are thought to have a certain level of future cognition³¹ and “some animals can

22 Marion Gymnich, “The End of the World (as We Know It)? – Cultural Ways of Worldmaking in Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Narratives,” in *Narrative in Culture*, eds. Astrid Erll and Roy Sommer (De Gruyter: Berlin/Boston, 2019), 58.

23 Nunez, *The Friend*.

24 Nunez, *The Friend*.

25 Alexandra Alter, “Sigrid Nunez Wins Wins 2018 National Book Award For ‘The Friend,’” *New York Times*, November 14, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/books/national-book-awards.html#:~:text=Sigrid%20Nunez%27s%20%27The%20Friend%27&text=A%20sometimes%20acerbic%20meditation%20on,the%20comedy%20here%20writes%20itself.%E2%80%9D>>.

26 Kirkus, “The Friend: Review,” *Kirkus*, February 6, 2018, <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sigrid-nunez/the-friend-nunez/>>.

27 Hellen Mcalpin, “‘The Friend’ Is No Shaggy Dog Story,” NPR, January 23, 2018, <<https://www.npr.org/2018/01/23/579233885/the-friend-is-no-shaggy-dog-story>>.

28 Lidija Haas, “New Books,” *Harpers*, February 2018, <<https://harpers.org/archive/2018/02/new-books-194/>>.

29 Jo Lou, “7 Books To Help You Understand the Dogs (and Dog People) in Your Life,” *Electric Lit*, January 11, 2018, <<https://electricliterature.com/7-books-to-help-you-understand-the-dogs-and-dog-people-in-your-life/>>.

30 King, *How Animals Grieve*, 5.31.

31 William A. Roberts, “Evidence for future cognition in animals,” *Learning and Motivation* no. 43 (2012): 169–180, accessed November 28, 2022, DOI: 10.1016/j.lmot.2012.05.005. <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0023969012000318>>.

travel mentally backwards into the past, and forwards into the future,³² they cannot be expected to think years ahead and envision a “what if” scenario (e.g. what if my owner dies?). However, recent studies suggest that animals do in fact feel grief and mourn, although the evidence is not conclusive.³³ Mourning has been observed in many animal species, but it does not necessarily indicate an animal’s realization of their personal mortality.³⁴

In Nunez’s³⁵ novel, two beings – a nameless woman and Apollo, a Great Dane – mourn a deceased friend. Apollo was the deceased man’s pet, the woman the man’s friend. After the man commits suicide, the dog is adopted – quite unwillingly – by the woman. Agreeably, “the distinctly emotional, and often traumatic, pain that comes with losing someone we love (whether human or animal) is a universal experience”³⁶ – the question then becomes if such pain is universal for humans only. Researchers suggest that

the neural substrates for conscious and affective states humans share with other species, the shared physical and mental significance of attachment relationships, the complex social structures and interpersonal relationships many animals construct and nurture, suggest that grief might be a constituent part of nonhuman animals’ lives just as it is of humans.³⁷

Nunez’s³⁸ character of the nameless grieving woman undoubtedly exhibits the signs of the first stage of mourning described by O’Connor³⁹ as overly contemplating the past. Illogical preconceptions about one’s role in the deceased’s death are present as what has been called “counterfactual thinking [which] involves our real or imagined role in contributing to the death or the suffering of our loved one.”⁴⁰ The woman ruminates about her “mistake of thinking that, because it was something you talked about a lot, it was something you wouldn’t do.”⁴¹ There are several other manifestations of grief in the woman’s life – amnesia, forgetfulness, irrational fear, seeing visions of the deceased, insomnia, and anxiety.⁴² “Early on, there were times when I found

32 Nicola S. Clayton, Timothy J. Bussey, and Anthony Dickinson, “Can animals recall the past and plan for the future?” *Nature Review Neuroscience* no. 4 (2003): 685–691, accessed December 14, 2022, DOI: 10.1038/nrn1180. <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12894243/>, 690>.

33 Stefania Uccheddu et. al., “Domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) grieve over the loss of a conspecific,” *Nature Scientific Reports* 12, no. 1920 (2022): 1–9, accessed November 30, 2022, DOI: 10.1038/s41598-022-05669-y. <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-05669-y>>.

34 Susana Monsó, “How to Tell If Animals Can Understand Death,” *Erkenntnis* no. 87 (2022): 117–136, accessed January 5, 2023, DOI: 10.1007/s10670-019-00187-2. <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10670-019-00187-2>>; King, *How Animals Grieve*.

35 Nunez, *The Friend*.

36 Susan Cohen and Adam Clark, “Loss, Grief, and Bereavement in the Context of Human-Animal Relationships,” in *Transforming Trauma: Resilience and Healing Through Our Connections With Animals*, eds. Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins (New York: Purdue University Press, 2019), 396.

37 Teja Brooks Pribac, “Animal Grief,” *Animal Studies Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013): 67–90, 83.

38 Nunez, *The Friend*.

39 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*.

40 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 14.2.

41 Nunez, *The Friend*, 5.

42 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*.

myself somewhere without remembering how I got there, when I'd come home on some errand only to forget what it was."⁴³

Acceptance or resignation are also a part of this stage of grieving. The two concepts are not synonymous – “accepting is focusing on life as it is now without the deceased, without forgetting the deceased. Resignation goes one step further and suggests that your loved one is gone, and that you will never be happy again.”⁴⁴ The woman understands the concept of death, she gives in to grieving, cries, and dwells on the past relationship between her and the man: “It would outlast all my other friendships. It would bring me intense happiness.”⁴⁵ On the other hand, Apollo the dog seems the most tragic character in the novel, since he cannot be reasoned with. Apollo's grief is raw, and his reaction is resignation, since he does not eat, seems to lose his will to live, and expresses his loss with his voice:

You can't explain death to a dog. He didn't understand that Daddy was never coming home again. He waited by the door day and night. For a while he wouldn't even eat, I was afraid he'd starve to death. But the worst part was, every once in a while, he'd make this noise, this howling, or wailing, or whatever it was. Not loud, but strange, like a ghost or some other weird thing. It went on and on.⁴⁶

The mourning processes of the two characters stand in juxtaposition. Accepting “requires being able to move our thoughts from relationships that were, to relationships that are and relationships that could be, and back again.”⁴⁷ The woman manifests acceptance in her willingness to take care of the dog and move on with her life. Apollo, on the other hand, is unable to move forward – he behaves “in a listless way, without any real interest or curiosity.”⁴⁸

Processing Grief and Grieving

Facing a new reality without a recently deceased loved one is difficult. O'Connor explains that the brain is simply unable to comprehend the sudden absence: “The idea that the person is simply no longer in this dimensional world is not a logical answer to their absence, as far as the brain is concerned.”⁴⁹ If humans have difficulties grasping death, it is safe to assume that animals must be even more confused by the sudden absence of someone close to them.

O'Connor calls the second stage of grieving being in the present. Grief is manifested similarly to fear or panic, both of which are “likely to bring the separated animal into contact with others of its species, or ‘conspecifics.’”⁵⁰ Such a reaction motivates animals to seek company,

43 Nunez, *The Friend*, 122.

44 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 14.36.

45 Nunez, *The Friend*, 22.

46 Nunez, *The Friend*, 36.

47 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 14.41.

48 Nunez, *The Friend*, 40.

49 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 6.28.

50 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 15.7.

since “social contact leads to the release of opioids in the distressed animal, which functions both to soothe and to teach.”⁵¹

The social contact manifested in the novel is not between conspecifics, but between two different species – human and dog. At first, the cohabitation not ideal: “After a week I felt more like his jailer than his caretaker.”⁵² Speaking in the second person to the deceased man, the woman is convinced that Apollo “knows that you are gone for good.”⁵³ The grieving animal displays fits of anxiety: “He looks around as if befuddled. [...] Then the shakes begin. For periods that last from a few minutes to as long as half an hour, he covers and shivers uncontrollably.”⁵⁴

The woman’s response to caring for Apollo is comforting – she walks him, takes him to the vet, and lets him sleep in her bed. His grief is heartbreaking to witness, and she does everything in her power to make him happy again – or at least to mitigate his unhappiness. Her own grief is not abandoned, but rather shared through the dog’s grief. She understands his suffering, but on the other hand, the dog is therapeutic for her: “Having your dog is like having a part of you here.”⁵⁵

How, then, can they both move on – especially Apollo – from resigning to accepting? O’Connor claims that one must live in the present, since “only in the present moment can you feel joy or comfort. You cannot feel those things in the past or in the future.”⁵⁶ The woman realizes this in relation to Apollo’s grief, acknowledging that “He has to forget you. He has to forget you and fall in love with me. That’s what has to happen.”⁵⁷

The present is often a source of pain after a loss, since it reminds us what we do not have anymore. This experience is practically unescapable, since “there is grief in this world—not just yours in particular—and feeling grief at some point is one of the rules of being human.”⁵⁸ It is safe to assume that everyone will have this feeling at some point in their lives. This eventuality leads us back to resilience and to the question whether we can or even want to survive, or possibly even thrive.

As Apollo cannot make this choice for himself, the woman decides for him: “I want him to be Mr. Happy Dog.”⁵⁹ The stage of accepting thus begins later for him than for her – it is even questionable whether he would reach this stage at all without help. The woman’s compassion for the dog is what can be called recognizing the animal’s *umwelt*, a term coined by Von Uexkull as the animal’s self-world,⁶⁰ a concept by which humans can attempt to “understand[...] how a dog perceives the world, through considering his or her *umwelt*, is critical for humans to strengthen their interactions and relationships with dogs.”⁶¹ The woman has the animal’s wellbeing in mind,

51 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 15.7.

52 Nunez, *The Friend*, 40.

53 Nunez, *The Friend*, 40.

54 Nunez, *The Friend*, 85.

55 Nunez, *The Friend*, 38.

56 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 15.11.

57 Nunez, *The Friend*, 88.

58 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 15.24.

59 Nunez, *The Friend*, 88.

60 Ann R. Howie, Aubrey H. Fine, and Lindsay A. Rojas, “Why the Dog?” in *Transforming Trauma: Resilience and Healing Through Our Connections With Animals*, eds. Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins (New York: Purdue University Press, 2019).

61 Von Uexkull in Howie, Fine, and Rojas, “Why the Dog?” 303.

yet questions her own motives: “[...] do I believe that if I love Apollo – beautiful, aging, melancholy Apollo – I will wake one morning to find him gone and you in his place, back from the land of the dead?”⁶²

She seems to second-guess her attempts: “I don’t know if playing music really can soothe a dog’s breast, but on the internet I find it among suggestions for dealing with canine depression,”⁶³ followed by stronger doubts: “I don’t think he’s listening. If he is, I don’t think he cares.”⁶⁴ With Apollo, resignation prevails, which implies that “there are only negative consequences to the death.”⁶⁵

From Healing to Resilience

“The grieving person may be sad, or angry, and that is the natural response to loss. For those around them, cheering them up is not the goal. Being with them is the goal.”⁶⁶ Both the woman and the dog constitute the bereaved. In sharing each other’s company and being with each other, they both begin to heal.

Apollo’s condition gradually improves: “His tail moves side to side, a wag for sure, but a wistful one,”⁶⁷ and the woman finds comfort in Apollo’s presence: “When you’re lying in bed full of night thoughts, such as why did your friend have to die and how much longer will it be before you lose the roof over your head, having a huge warm body pressed along the length of your spine is an amazing comfort?”⁶⁸

O’Connor calls this stage of grieving mapping the future. The sorrow is not necessarily gone, but it is managed – the bereaved is able to not to go back to her or his previous life, but must create a new one. O’Connor uses the term “restoring” with a similar meaning to Cyrulnik’s restoration:⁶⁹ “Restoring a fulfilling life may be a better definition, pointing to adaptation, which I think is more accurate than thinking of grief as being ‘over.’”⁷⁰

There is a popular image depicting how grief works comparing it to a huge ball in a box with a pain “button” on the bottom.⁷¹ At first, as it moves, the huge ball of sadness almost always bumps into the pain. However, over time the ball decreases in size and one can move around in the box without always hitting the pain, which if touched, still hurts in the same way as it always has. Nevertheless, there is increasing time to recover between the episodes of grief. The green ball of grief does not necessarily disappear – yet it bumps into the pain button less frequently.

62 Nunez, *The Friend*, 124.

63 Nunez, *The Friend*, 98.

64 Nunez, *The Friend*, 99.

65 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 14.36.

66 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 16.4.

67 Nunez, *The Friend*, 125.

68 Nunez, *The Friend*, 126.

69 Cyrulnik, *Resilience*.

70 O’Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 19.7.

71 Aching Arms UK, “The Ball & The Box Analogy of Grief,” Facebook, January 20, 2020, <<https://www.facebook.com/AchingArmsUK/posts/the-ball-the-box-analogy-of-grieftheres-a-box-with-a-ball-in-it-and-a-pain-button/2701210436661061/>>.

Similarly, in Nunez's novel⁷² Apollo now "has grown used to his new home, and to me"⁷³ and the woman is healing too: "I think I really am beginning to feel a little better."⁷⁴ The shared grief subsides in light of their new relationship. As O'Connor says, "to restore a meaningful life, we have to be able to imagine that life."⁷⁵ The ability to envisage such a life does not mean forgetting the past, but embracing it and moving forward – not dwelling on it. A change is necessary, a sort of metamorphosis.⁷⁶

The novel clearly addresses not only grieving and healing, but the mutual aspect of both. The woman sees her own sadness in Apollo's; and Apollo's mourning serves both as a catalyst for the woman's survival instinct, and her desperate need to save Apollo. With gentle humor, Nunez acknowledges that "in this case it's the animal who can't deal, and you're his emotional support human,"⁷⁷ although the relationship benefits and sustains both characters: "Sitting in the therapist's office, Apollo at my side, I can't help smiling. It's like we're in couples therapy. Except that we get along."⁷⁸

Tedeschi and Jenkins postulate "that one reason why animals may be so helpful in trauma recovery is because of their capacity to foster resiliency in those affected."⁷⁹ Nunez⁸⁰ takes this premise and turns it around – animals foster resilience in humans, but humans also foster resilience in animals. The bereaved heal from trauma together – and they heal each other.

This result can be considered as achieving resilience as perceived by O'Connor,⁸¹ Basseler,⁸² Cyrulnik,⁸³ Tedeschi and Jenkins.⁸⁴ Nunez's⁸⁵ characters do survive trauma, move through the stages of dwelling onto past, remaining in the present as well as embracing the future. The woman finds acceptance through caring for Apollo, who in turn finds solace in the woman, and consequently, the will to live. To a certain degree, it is also possible to refer to post-traumatic growth – the woman writes a novel about her friend, creating something beautiful out of tragedy.

The relationship between the woman and Apollo mirrors the relationship between the dog and his previous owner. Apollo's wellbeing improves, and the woman now refuses to entertain any notion of losing him: "Why, having saved him, must I now watch him suffer – suffer and die – and then be left alone, without him?"⁸⁶ and becomes stressed at the thought of losing him: "A recurring

72 Nunez, *The Friend*.

73 Nunez, *The Friend*, 125.

74 Nunez, *The Friend*, 155.

75 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 16.21.

76 Cyrulnik, *Resilience*.

77 Nunez, *The Friend*, 152.

78 Nunez, *The Friend*, 150.

79 Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins, "Introduction," 7.

80 Nunez, *The Friend*.

81 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*.

82 Basseler, "Stories of Dangerous Life in the Post-Trauma Age."

83 Cyrulnik, *Resilience*; Cyrulnik, "Narrative Resilience."

84 Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins, "Introduction."

85 Nunez, *The Friend*.

86 Nunez, *The Friend*, 168.

anxiety: Someone claiming to be Apollo's owner finally shows up [...] and now I'm expected to give him up."⁸⁷ The loss of a previous relationship – both for the woman and Apollo – provides fertile ground to nurture a new one, equally beautiful, and highly therapeutic.

Conclusion

Structuring the paper around O'Connor's⁸⁸ stages of grieving, I have attempted to illustrate how both main characters of Nunez's *The Friend* – the nameless woman and the Great Dane Apollo – process loss and navigate through grief and grieving. This process has been portrayed as shared and mutual, with both characters helping one another process their respective losses. Each individual processes loss in different ways, each human as well as and each animal. While a scientific consensus is clear on human grieving – we feel grief and we mourn – animal grieving has only relatively recently come under examination. As expert on animal grief Barbara King comments, "in writing about animal bereavement, I walk a line stretched taut between two poles. The first is this wish to recognize the emotional lives of other animals. The other is my need to honor human uniqueness."⁸⁹

Nunez's⁹⁰ approach to animal grieving is based exactly on the premise of the uniqueness of each human and each animal. There is no attempt at anthropomorphizing. Instead, communication is stressed as a vital part of the healing process. That animals assist in communication has been well-documented through numerous forms of animal therapy available in the 21st century. After all, "what could be a more plausible and effective source of healing than that provided by centuries of convergent evidence, independently collected from multiple cultures on different continents?"⁹¹ The concept of mutual healing, however, has not been explored to such a degree, although it seems quite clear that not only humans need psychological aid, but animals do as well. King acknowledges that "more animal species think and feel more deeply than we'd ever suspected,"⁹² and only a few years after her claim it is already possible to observe attempts to heal traumatized dogs, even by reading to them.⁹³ Incidentally, this is one of the major factors in Apollo's healing journey; while Apollo has "never appeared to enjoy the music I played for him, was never soothed – not by music, not by massage – as he appears to be soothed now" by hearing words read to him.⁹⁴

Fiction has been kinder to animal feelings in the case of Nunez's⁹⁵ novel, showing that while the grieving – and healing – process is unique for humans and animals, it is equally painful, although when shared it can be beneficial for both grieving parties. Overcoming loss requires the acceptance of loss in order to move on. The concept of accepting, and consequent restoration, moving on and

87 Nunez, *The Friend*, 176.

88 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*.

89 King, *How Animals Grieve*, 5.31.

90 Nunez, *The Friend*.

91 Perry, "Foreword," xi.

92 King, *How Animals Grieve*, 5.12.

93 Andy Newman, "How to Heal a Traumatized Dog: Read It a Story," *New York Times*, June 9, 2016, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/nyregion/how-to-heal-a-traumatized-dog-read-it-a-story.html>>.

94 Nunez, *The Friend*, 133.

95 Nunez, *The Friend*.

not giving up is present in the scientific works of O'Connor,⁹⁶ Basseler,⁹⁷ Cyrulnik,⁹⁸ Tedeschi and Jenkins⁹⁹ and King.¹⁰⁰ Nunez's novel¹⁰¹ reflects this pattern, applying it both to humans and animals, portraying resilience as a step in withstanding a traumatic experience. It is *withstanding* that is prominent in her novel, which in Nunez's¹⁰² conception means accepting negative circumstances and processing them in order to be able to live a meaningful life, albeit not necessarily the same life as the one before the loss. To return to the questions stated in the introduction: Shared trauma among different species does indeed lead to improved resilience of humans and animals in the presented narrative – as I have illustrated both characters do not return to their previous lives, but carve out a new one for themselves. And the shared experience of grieving and healing is beneficial for both parties involved, allowing each to process their trauma and move on without the destruction or self-destruction which might have otherwise followed for one or both of them

The story itself, or the process of telling it, might be perceived in terms of O'Connor's fourth stage of grieving – teaching what we have learned – since the main character herself writes a novel about her journey reflected in this paper. In O'Connor's words, "grieving is a form of learning."¹⁰³ Sharing what we have learned with others may serve to help them in the process of grieving, and "learning how others have restored a meaningful life can provide new things to try."¹⁰⁴ With all this being said, O'Connor stresses the sharing of one's story instead of preaching or giving direct counsel, since "advice is exactly what makes grieving people hold at arm's length those who would like to help them."¹⁰⁵ Relating a tale like hers, on the other hand, is less didactic and forceful. The story of Apollo and his new companion provides an opportunity to "figure out" how to grieve subjectively, that is, in a way which is helpful and in the end, transforming.

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96 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*.

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98 Cyrulnik, *Resilience*; Cyrulnik, "Narrative Resilience."

99 Philip Tedeschi and Molly Anne Jenkins, "Introduction."

100 King, *How Animals Grieve*.

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103 O'Connor, *The Grieving Brain*, 17.01.

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